
Foreword

Dear Friends,

The people of Wisconsin have always been connected to the land and water of the state. From the northern forests to the mighty Mississippi, from the central sands to the mix of wetlands and rich farmland in the south, our lands and waters provide a great variety of environmental, social, and economic benefits. Wisconsin is recognized around the country as a leader in resource stewardship. We understand that a healthy, sustainable environment is essential to our prosperous economy. We also recognize that the opposite is equally true: a vibrant, growing economy is essential to a well-managed and well-protected natural resource base. Together, our environment and economy allow Wisconsinites to enjoy an exceptional quality of life.

To be sure, our landscape has been shaped by the strong stewardship ethic of generations of private landowners, local conservation and recreation groups, and public agencies. Equally certain, however, is that lands and waters critical in meeting our conservation and recreation needs are under pressures unknown only a generation ago. Private lands that once supported high quality farmlands, forests, and wetlands are now being converted to a variety of other uses. Our rural countryside is becoming fragmented into smaller parcels as an increasing number of people can afford a 10, 20 or 40 acre private "getaway." Often, this fragmentation is self-fulfilling -- the more that areas become fragmented, the more pressure there is on remaining parcels to subdivide. Similarly, during the last thirty years there has been an explosion in the number of lakefront houses.

Our federal, state, and county-owned public lands, most of which were isolated and remote when originally acquired, are increasingly surrounded by and interspersed with development. These changes often cause conflicts, not only with the land and water's ability to support ecological functions, but also with recreation opportunities and enjoyment.

Clearly, we need to build houses, roads, schools, industrial structures, commercial districts, and the many other facilities that support our growing population and expanding economy. But we must ensure that our developed infrastructure does not impair either our environment and the natural ecological processes that support it or our farm, forest, recreation, and tourism industries. Finding an appropriate balance among our interrelated needs for a healthy environment, a strong economy, and a high quality of life is difficult. Part of finding that balance requires knowing where the places that will be critical in meeting future conservation and recreation needs are located.

Finding an appropriate balance among our interrelated needs for a healthy environment, a strong economy, and a high quality of life is difficult. Part of finding that balance requires knowing where the places that will be critical in meeting future conservation and recreation needs are located.

At the request of the Natural Resources Board, the Department undertook a study to assess the state's protection needs for conservation and recreation lands over the next fifty years. Some of the questions asked were: of the lands and waters that will be critical for conserving our plants and animals and their habitats, which remain unprotected? What gaps exist now (and will likely emerge in the future) in providing abundant and satisfying outdoor recreation? How can we most effectively build upon the state's existing investment in protected lands to fill conservation and recreation gaps? What special places will our children and grandchildren wish we had protected? The study has focused on identifying what of our state or regionally-significant "green infrastructure" remains in need of protection. This Land Legacy Report summarizes the results of the study.

My hope is that this report, by identifying a fifty-year vision, will help the Department and others interested in perpetuating our land and water resources maintain focus on our long-term needs as we address short-term opportunities. We cannot restrict future generations from determining what places will be important to them. But hopefully the vision laid out here can help ensure that those who follow have adequate options to choose from when assessing their land use needs.

I suspect that most Wisconsin residents no longer have a direct relative who owns a farm or a forest. I don't. As a result, far fewer of us spend Thanksgiving or the Fourth of July at a grandparent's dairy farm or an aunt and uncle's forest cabin hearing how their lives are affected by the price of milk, regulations to protect water quality, the spread of invasive species, and the changing nature of our rural countryside. As our population grows increasingly urban and suburban, we risk losing a connection to the natural world and an appreciation for its complexity, wealth, and fragility. It is easier than ever for our children to think that food comes from the grocery store, water from the faucet, heat from the furnace, and that waste disappears down the drain and into the garbage truck. Maintaining the conservation and environmental ethic of our citizenry goes beyond the Department's capability and the scope of this report. We will need to work with many others to achieve this goal. It is my hope that this report, by identifying lands and waters considered critical in meeting future conservation and recreation needs, will be one part of keeping our population engaged in outdoor recreation, exposed to natural resource issues, and involved in finding solutions to the challenges that lie ahead.

Even over a fifty-year period the Department can help protect only a small percentage of the lands identified within these places. The Department will need the public's help in developing new ways to help "keep Wisconsin Wisconsin" – possibly new kinds of incentives for landowners, working more closely with local units of government in their efforts to craft land use plans, or offering different types of technical assistance. State acquisition of key parcels has been, and

Although it is the culmination of over two years of work and public input, this report is really just the beginning of a discussion that we look forward to having with the people of the state about the landscape we will leave our children and grandchildren.

will continue to play, an integral part in protecting our land and water resources, but it is only one component of an overall land protection strategy. The people of Wisconsin, particularly local residents, will determine what becomes of these places and what are the most appropriate protection strategies. Although it is the culmination of over two years of work and extensive public input, this report is really just the beginning of a discussion that we look forward to having with the people of the state about the landscape we will leave our children and grandchildren.



Darrell Bazzell
Secretary, Department of Natural Resources